



To Reconstruct a Sacrificial Site

Aspects of the Iron Age Sacrificial Site at Eketorp Fort, Sweden

The article discusses the example of a reconstruction of an Iron Age sacrificial place in Eketorp, Sweden as well as the limits to what can be reconstructed in a Living History Museum.

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The site

Eketorp fort on southern Öland is a prehistoric ring fort excavated between 1964 and 1974. The excavations showed that the first fort on this location was built in the fourth century AD (Eketorp I). About one hundred years later, it was torn down and then re-built on the same spot. The new fifth-century ring fort (Eketorp II) served as a fortified farmers' settlement for about 250 years until it was abandoned in the late seventh century (Borg, Näsman, & Wegraeus 1976). The fort was used one last time, from roughly 1170 to 1240, as a military garrison during the process that led to the creation of the kingdom of Sweden (Borg 2000: 22 pp).

combination of reconstruction, experimental archaeology and popular education was realized (Pettersson 2003: 209). In 1984, a museum with finds from the excavations was inaugurated. The Central Board of National Antiquities administered Eketorp fort until 2001. Since then, it has been assigned to Kalmar County Museum (see Fig. 1).

The fort's mission is to make the Iron Age and Middle Ages come alive using reconstruction work, guided tours, school programs, role-plays, experiments, crafts and common-day activities from those periods. Approximately 50,000 persons per year visit the fort.

What can be reconstructed?

During the season, several archaeologists are employed, working with educational activities within archaeology. One part of this work is to demonstrate and help the visitors participate in every day activities and crafts. These activities are, as far as possible, based on our knowledge of how they were carried out during the periods in question. To watch and participate in the characteristic activities is a way of understanding the conditions under which the people of those times lived (Fig. 2).

For a typical family, a day at Eketorp fort may look like this: on entering the fort, the visitor is greeted and offered clothes true to the period which they can wear during their visit, which is highly appreciated. Next, the visitor can try some of the crafts and activities that are the topic of the day, such as textile work or smithing. At certain times during the day, guided tours are performed, some of which start with a short role-play. After such a tour, the visitors can learn archery, visit the museum or pet the animals that graze freely in and around the fort.

So far, Eketorp fort is no great exception from other living history museums. The activities carried out with the visitors are to a great extent uncontroversial and adapted to children. Since this goes for more or less all similar establishments, we have to ask ourselves when recreating prehistoric times what we actually reconstruct and what we really want to reconstruct. Is it a mass-produced, cute "light-version" of the Iron Age/Middle Ages or is it a version that comes as close as possible to the latest knowledge of these periods? Where are the limits to what you can reconstruct? Which can be justified from an ethical point of view?

■ Fig. 1 The reconstructed Eketorp ring fort.

Eketorp and other sacrificial sites

During 2004 and 2005, a great effort was made to illustrate what an Iron Age sacrificial place might have looked like on the basis of excavations at Eketorp and other wetland sacrificial places from Northern Europe's Iron Age.

Excavations showed that sacrifices to deities were put in the shallow lake located east of the fort. Although this lake was drained in recent times, a small water hole (still there today) was kept open just outside the curtain wall to allow grazing animals to drink. In 1973, an excavation was undertaken on the eastern gate of Eketorp II, alongside the edge of the waterhole. In 1986, another excavation was carried out in an area of 18 m² to understand the nature of the water hole itself. The material recovered from these excavations consists of bones from many different animals: horse, cattle, goat/sheep, and a large number of hazel rods. Most significant are the horse finds which are mainly represented by crania and leg bones (Edgren & Herschend 2000: 21 pp).

There are other sites with similar horse bone material found in Scandinavia (e.g. Sorte Muld and Ellegård on Bornholm, Rislev Mose and Vestervig on Zealand (Denmark), as well as Hjärup, Fredriksberg and Lockarp in Scania (Sweden)). Used during different parts of the Iron Age, these sites range in date from the early Roman Iron Age until the Viking Age (Klindt-Jensen 1957: 84,

Klindt-Jensen 1967: 143, Carlie 2002: 659, Josefson 2005: 21p). Iron Age horse sacrifices are also known from Öland, mainly from the Skedemosse bog where about 100 horses were sacrificed at which is interpreted as the central sacrificial place on the island during the Iron Age (Hagberg 1967). There is, therefore, extensive material for comparison of South Scandinavian finds of horse bones that have been interpreted as ritual sacrifices.

To illustrate a horse sacrifice

Ever since Kalmar County Museum took on the responsibility of Eketorp fort, there has been an internal discussion concerning the reconstruction of a sacrificial site and what it might have looked like during the Iron Age. Crucial was the question of how a horse offering could be illustrated. Among the arguments against the idea were those that suggested that visitors would never accept the use of real horse heads. The fear was that too many visitors would take offence and that it would be too disgusting for children. We discussed the possibility of using stuffed horse heads, heads made of wood, and/or other materials. Because of this ongoing debate, no reconstruction of the sacrificial site was made during 2002 and 2003. However, during 2004 and 2005, we settled the matter and decided to proceed with our reconstruction of the sacrificial site at Eketorp based on archaeological material, early medieval texts and anthropological studies. Here we will describe the reconstruction made in 2005, since it was the most complete one.

The most notable part of the sacrificial site was the two fresh horses that symbolised the present year's offering by the Iron Age people (Fig. 3). The heads of these horses were placed on diagonal poles, and their tails were put into their mouths. The horse hides, with the hoofs still attached to them, were stretched out behind their heads. Since the excavations provided no evidence of the edible parts of any horses, it was decided that these were probably removed and consumed in a sacrificial meal in the company of the gods before the horse hides and heads were displayed.



■ Fig. 3 The sacrificial place just outside the fort.

The evidence

This reconstruction is based on the following information. According to the Arabic tradesman al-Tartuschi, who visited the market town of Hedeby in AD 950, villagers placed animal heads on poles to honour the gods during feasts that were celebrated with food and drink (Ström 1985: 86 p). The custom of consuming the horse of a dead man at his funeral was practised among the mounted nomads of the east, such as the Huns (Görman 1993: 283 p). This practice could have been adopted by Scandinavians who fought in the Hun army from the third century to the beginning of the sixth century AD (Fabech 1989: 114).

Anthropological studies of the Altai people from the 1840s are also often used to support presumed interaction and influence between the mounted nomad peoples and Southern Scandinavia. Altai horse sacrifice involved breaking the animal's spine and skinning it so that the head, hoofs and hide formed a single entity. The hide was then placed on an approximately 8.5 m-long pole, with the horse head supported on its end and the legs hanging down on each side (Radloff 1884b: 20 pp).

A similar practice is seen in the saga of Egil Skallagrimsson. Here, horse heads are stuck on poles in the pre-Christian Norse ritual called *nidstäng*. Specifically, Egil, in his wrath, erects a hazel pole with a horse head on top and points it toward his enemies and then curses them (Alvins 1938: 150p).

At Eketorp, it is interesting that hazel rods are found in the same context as the horse heads. There is, however, no evidence in the Eketorp exca-



■ Fig. 2 Archaeologist Jannika Grimbe helps visitors make Iron Age glass beads.

■ **Fig. 4** Horse bones arranged according to finds in south Scandinavia and the Caucasus.



variations of postholes, although some have been found in archaeological contexts containing horse crania elsewhere (e.g., at Hjärup and Fredriksberg in Scania) (Carlie 2002: 664 pp, Josefson 2005: 21 p).

The placing of the tails in the horses' mouths at Eketorp is based on finds at Rislev Mose where tail bones were found in connection to horse crania (Klindt- Jensen 1957).

What happened after the horse sacrifice?

What happened to the suspended horses after the flesh and hide rotted away from the bones? The excavations in 1986 indicated that the water hole had probably been dredged many times in the past up until the end of Eketorp II (Edgren & Herschend 1988: 5). Therefore, we believe that the animals were not necessarily left hanging from poles until they fell. Eketorp's people probably changed and rearranged their sacrificial site

■ **Fig. 5** The whole sacrificial place in the summer of 2005.



time and again. One possibility is that the bones were taken down and placed directly in the water or arranged around it (Fig. 4). To visualise this, we took the skeletal bones from the previous season's reconstruction and arranged them in a pattern around the water hole to illustrate the continuity of the site. The bones were placed on the ground with the cranium in the centre and foot bones surrounding it. Archaeological evidence for this kind of arrangement is found in many places in Southern Scandinavia and in the Eastern cultures mentioned earlier. For example, Sorte Muld, Rislev Mose and Bajtal- Tschapkan in the Caucasus Mountains have bones deposited in this way (Klindt- Jensen 1957: 85 pp, Klindt- Jensen 1959: 55 or Görman 1993: 289).

Other animals and finds

Beside horses, bones from cattle, pig and goat/sheep were found at the excavations. Our reconstructions in 2004 and 2005 used pig bones to illustrate this point. In 2004, a fresh pig head was put on a pole with its feet lying beneath it. In 2005, two fresh pig heads were put on a table and the skeletal crania of the pig from 2004 was placed with the horse bones discussed earlier.

A large number of hazel rods were also found in the water hole. Leaning on Icelandic sagas, Bengt Edgren and Frans Herschend argue that Eketorp's sacrificial site should be seen as both a sacrificial site and a place where the **thing**⁽¹⁾ met. For example, according to Egil Skallagrimsson's saga, hazel rods were placed around the area where the thing met, an area demarcated with string laid around the rods (Edgren and Herschend 1988: 7, Edgren 2000: 21 pp). Therefore, at Eketorp in 2005, we placed hazel rods in the ground around the reconstructed sacrificial site.

We also laid a paving from the gate in the fence around the water hole. The paving extends to the edge of the water hole and ends with an approximately two-meter-long oak board that forms a footbridge above the water's surface. Around this paving,

we placed the skeletal crania and foot bones to broaden the interpretation of the sacrificial site.

Experiments with food offerings

Since pottery with food residue has been found at the sacrificial site of Lake Käringsjön in Halland in south-eastern Sweden (Arbman 1945), our reconstructed sacrificial site also made several experiments with food offerings. One example involved pouring porridge (rich in fat and based on an analysis of the food residue found in a pot at Lake Käringsjön) into a ceramic pot with a hole in its bottom. Based on a suggestion by Carlie (1998) that food offerings were performed in this manner, the experiment showed that if the vessel was placed on a few stones, it looked as if the wetland slowly sucked the porridge away. To our knowledge, no one has tested this hypothesis before. We also placed pottery containing offerings of bread, beer and sausages on the footbridge and around the paving (Fig. 5).

The reaction

The reconstruction of the sacrificial site started in the end of June and lasted for about two months. During opening hours, our personnel actively conveyed the message of the sacrificial site. The guided tours started at the site and the role-plays took place there. In short, the sacrificial site became an integral part of the archaeological education about the Iron Age performed at Eketorp. It is very important to note that our purpose with this reconstruction was not to achieve cheap effects or to shock the visitors. Instead, we hoped to show a part of Iron Age society that is rarely illustrated at all. Parallel to the reconstruction, visitors could participate in a nearby excavation of an actual Iron Age sacrificial site under the guidance of experienced archaeologists (see the coming report). We maintain that this is one of the most ambitious popular educational projects carried out in the living history/open air museum business. As a visitor you can participate in an excavation of a

(1) A thing was the governing assembly in Germanic societies, made up of the free men of the community and presided by lawspeakers.

sacrificial site, see an interpretation of what that site might have looked like, watch and take part in sacrifices via role-plays, and listen to what we know about the site and similar sites during guided tours.

Questions from visitors concerning the reconstructed site were common. These questions were almost always very open-minded and honest: Why have you done this? How can you support this interpretation? Are the horse heads real?

In a few instances visitors condemned the reconstruction - one or two persons out of 50.000. What does this indicate? First, it is not possible to please every visitor (and perhaps it should not be) whether you are controversial or not. But if you do something that could be offensive, you have to be prepared for strong reactions, even if they do not occur.

Both of us have guided many tours at Eketorp, describing what we have done and why. The reactions we have encountered were, in most cases, great curiosity. Sure, it looks a little horrible, but when we explained it, most visitors agreed that it is important to reconstruct prehistoric times as realistically as we think it might have looked. Otherwise, it is difficult to make history come alive. Actually, you could argue that visitors demand the “truth” and realism (as far as archaeology can deliver it)! Is that not a reasonable demand? Do living history museums live up to it?

A mistake

We did, however, make one mistake. The manager of Eketorp, Jan Olofsson, did not apply for permission from the Swedish Board of Agriculture to install such horse heads. Not wanting to hide the fact that this mistake was made, or play down the importance of obtaining such permission, we wish to discuss it openly.

The reaction from the media was swift. The first was the local paper *Ölandsbladet* which wrote about “illegal horse carcasses by the fort” in an article on August 30th (*Ölandsbladet* 2005: 3,7). *Barometern*, the largest newspaper in the region, followed the next day with an article about the prosecution by the Swedish Board



■ **Fig. 7** The horse tails were stuck into mouths, based on finds at Risleve mose.

of Agriculture (*Barometern*, 2005: 12). The news was also sent to TT, the Swedish News Agency, and published on Teletext. Different newspapers around Sweden, for example, *Sydsvenskan*, the largest newspaper in southernmost Sweden, published small articles about the situation. A month later, an article in another regional newspaper, *Östra Småland*, reported that the Swedish Board of Agriculture had handed in a request for an indictment to the public prosecutor. The prosecution concerns a suspected felony against an EU decree concerning the handling of animal by-products (*Östra Småland* 2005: 14).

As soon as it became evident that Eketorp fort should have applied for permission (i.e. on the August 30th), we contacted the Swedish Board of Agriculture and immediately removed the pig and horse heads. They were later collected by a special transport which delivers agricultural waste for destruction.

At that point we thought that the news value of the story was over. But two of the largest Swedish evening papers, *Kvällsposten* and *Expressen*, published articles on November 14th with the headline, “Severed horse heads were shown to children” (*Expressen* 2005: 24 and *Kvällsposten* 2005: 17). This headline constituted the *Expressen*’s news bill in the area around Kalmar (**Fig. 6**). These arti-

cles were biased towards the sensational and the morbid rather than the suspected felony. In both articles, a small “Short Facts box” was included entitled “The crazy rituals of the Vikings,” despite the fact that our reconstruction concerned something that took place several hundred years earlier.

It is still unclear at this moment what will happen with the prosecution. The case is not closed and the police will do their investigation. The suspicion of felony remains. Similar reconstructions have been made before. At the Lejre Experimental Centre in Denmark there is a sacrificial bog with horse heads and hides arranged similarly since about 1970.

Why reconstruct horse sacrifices?

The answer to this question is simple. Because it belongs to the Iron Age society that we reconstruct and because it is possible to carry out!

More interesting, however, is the discussion about the limits of what can be reconstructed. First, what holds us back? Is it a question of ethics, funding or the lack of source material? How high should the demand of authenticity be?

In her dissertation concerning more than 300 archaeological reconstructions in Scandinavia, Bodil

Petersson underlines the relativity of the demands of the visitors when it comes to authenticity in reconstructions, depending on the focus of the individual open-air/living history museum. For example, modern materials, that are hidden in reconstructed buildings, are hardly disturbing if the focus is to make the building and its prehistoric context come alive, but it is very disturbing if the purpose is to show the building process and methods during that time (Petersson 2003: 361). The reason for using modern materials in these cases is, most likely, primarily financial.

In the Eketorp case, the line of argument would be the opposite: it would be more expensive to make exact copies of horses in wood or other materials. The purpose was, however, not to save money, but to reconstruct a sacrificial site with a touch of experiment, i.e. how is the archaeological evidence from a sacrificial site formed? Thus, only authentic materials can be used. Besides that we maintain that if authentic materials are available and do not harm the understanding and experience, such materials (or methods) should be used (see Petersson 2003: 359).

What might have stopped this reconstruction of horse sacrifice, besides the law? Ethics can be seen as the teachings of morals, either as normative ethics (i.e. prescriptions of what is right and wrong) or as meta-eth-

ics (i.e. the study of different conceptions and values used in moral reasoning and what they actually mean in terms of right, wrong, duty and evil) (Webart 1995: 19)

Which moral arguments can be used in favour of reconstructing horse sacrifice in the manner we did?

- We think that it is important to show as many aspects as possible of Iron Age society. In her discussion about popular education and ethics, Webart maintains that museums usually do not educate their visitors in the fields of, for example, “ritual, symbolic, ideological and ethic aspects of the material culture,” but do educate them when it comes to, for instance, “traditions, artefacts, technology, and traditional gender roles” (Webart 1995: 20)
- We argue that archaeological reconstruction and experiments in this example are related. Thereby, it is right to use natural materials.
- We maintain that it is more important to show courage and to challenge the audience than it is to serve an easily consumed and simplified picture of the Iron Age. Bodil Petersson shows that re-enactment can be made on several levels, everything from information signs to historic theatre shows. She argues that these differences can derive from funding, but as likely, from courage.

“How far do the responsible persons dare to go in an interpretation of the past?” (Petersson 2003: 380). Concerning the Iron Age, the aspects of everyday life, family and security are the ones that dominate living history in Scandinavian open-air museums and reconstructions. A ritual perspective, just like war-like features belong to the exceptions (Petersson 2003: 314). Maybe this makes it even more important to illustrate these aspects?

- Furthermore, we argue that it is an important task for a museum to inspire debate, questions and thoughts among visitors.

We believe that every reconstruction demands an explanation and an understandable context in relation to the visitor. When we encounter the visitor, we must always be prepared to show him/her why we decided to illustrate things in a certain way, which archaeological material we based our reconstruction on, how we interpreted these finds, et cetera. We must also be very precise when it comes to the parts where our interpretations are uncertain.

Conclusion

We hope that the debate within and among open-air museums, living history museums, re-enactment groups, traditional museums and archaeological institutions will begin to concern itself with what is underlined and focussed upon in the different prehistoric periods. There is a danger of stagnation if we just show the simplified, adapted conventional picture of pre-historic periods. It is also dangerous to choose not to work with as many aspects as you possibly can in popular education. Several methods of knowledge transfer and aspects of society should be used, without losing the scientific basis. If we do not pay attention to these dangers, the public will lose their involvement and interest in visiting open-air museums and living history museums. In fact, do living history museums have a right to exist if they become too focussed on entertainment?

But of course, you should always be aware of those activities that demand special permits. That is, obviously, absolutely necessary!

■ **Fig. 8**
Different stages in the horse sacrifice.



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- Barometern 31st of August 2005
- Expressen 14th of November 2005
- Kvällsposten 14th of November 2005
- Ölandsbladet 30th of August 2005
- Östra Småland 24th of September 2005

Summary

Zur Rekonstruktion eines Opferplatzes – Aspekte vom eisenzeitlichen Opferplatz der Ringburg von Eketorp, Schweden

Archäologische Freilichtmuseen müssen sich selbst die Frage stellen, was sie rekonstruieren können und was sie wirklich rekonstruieren wollen. Orientieren sie sich an einer Art von „Urgeschichte/Mittelalter light“ oder soll es eine Darstellung sein, die auf Grundlage der neuesten Forschungsergebnisse so korrekt wie möglich umgesetzt ist?

Die Ringburg von Eketorp rekonstruierte in den Jahren 2004 und 2005 einen eisenzeitlichen Opferplatz auf der Grundlage von Ausgrabungen bei Eketorp und anderer zeitgenössischer Befunde von Opferplätzen in Nordeuropa. Die entscheidende Frage war dabei, wie eine Pferdeopferung dargestellt werden sollte. Unter den Argumenten, die gegen eine Realisierung sprachen, waren jene Bedenken, die von der Annahme ausgehen, dass die Besucher die Verwendung von echten Pferdeköpfen nicht akzeptieren würden, weil es ein Ärgernis und für Kinder ungeeignet sei. Die Möglichkeit, präparierte Pferdeköpfe oder Modelle von Pferdeköpfen aus Holz oder anderem Material zu verwenden, wurde diskutiert. Schließlich wurde entschieden, die Rekonstruktion auf der Grundlage der archäologischen Befunde, der frühmittelalterlichen Texte und der anthropologischen Untersuchungen auszuführen.

Die Reaktion, die die Mitarbeiter von den Besuchern erhielten, war in den meisten Fällen Neugier, wobei die Meinung überwog, dass urgeschichtliche Plätze so realistisch wie möglich rekonstruiert werden sollten. Anderenfalls sei es sehr schwierig, Geschichte möglichst lebendig darzustellen.

Eine wesentliche Frage betrifft dabei die Grenzen der Rekonstruierbarkeit. Es

besteht die Gefahr der Stagnation, wenn wir lediglich vereinfachte, konventionell adaptierte Bilder zeigen.

Reconstitution d'un lieu de sacrifice

Il faut que les musées de plein air abordent la question de leurs possibilités et préférences concernant les reconstitutions. Est-ce qu'ils préfèrent la version facile et modérée ou celle qui tend à approcher de plus près des connaissances récentes?

Dans les années 2004 et 2005, la place-forte d'Eketorp a reconstitué un lieu de sacrifice d'après des fouilles réalisées à Eketorp et sur d'autres lieux marécageux de sacrifice du Nord, datées de l'âge du fer. La question clé a concerné la manière de présenter le sacrifice de chevaux. On a discuté surtout l'utilisation de vraies têtes de chevaux. Le principal argument négatif a soutenu l'idée que les visiteurs ne les accepteraient pas, qu'ils les trouveraient offensantes et mal appropriées aux enfants. Alors, on a mis en question l'utilisation de têtes naturalisées, têtes réalisées en bois et en d'autres matériaux. Enfin, on a décidé d'effectuer une reconstitution fondée sur des fouilles archéologiques, textes médiévaux anciens et recherches anthropologiques.

Les employés d'Eketorp ont constaté surtout de la curiosité de la part de visiteurs dont la plupart ont approuvé que les reconstitutions soient réalistes; sinon il ne serait pas possible de faire revivre le passé.

La question des limites du possible pour les reconstitutions est bien importante. Si on n'présente que des représentations simplifiées et conventionnelles, on risque la stagnation.

■ Jan Olofsson and Egil Josefson are both archaeologists. Jan is the manager of Eketorp fort, where also Egil has worked for several seasons. Egil is also specialized in the history and anthropology of religions.



■ Fig. 6 The Expressen newsbill, 14th of November 2005.